A Part But Apart: Discursive Explorations of the University as Contested Space in Kenya

Ane Turner Johnson & Dawn S. Singleton

To cite this article: Ane Turner Johnson & Dawn S. Singleton (2015) A Part But Apart: Discursive Explorations of the University as Contested Space in Kenya, Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 9:4, 237-252, DOI: 10.1080/15595692.2015.1044086

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2015.1044086

Published online: 13 Oct 2015.
A Part But Apart: Discursive Explorations of the University as Contested Space in Kenya

Ane Turner Johnson and Dawn S. Singleton

Department of Educational Services and Leadership
Rowan University, USA

Despite increasing interest in education and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, little is known about how universities and their constituents experience and make meaning of violence. This paper sought to capture university participants’ sense of belongingness and attachment to the university space resulting from experiences with ethnic conflict in Western Kenya. This paper uses discourse analysis to elicit linguistic constructions of context, contestation, and identity. Three discourses emerged from interview transcripts when treated as text: the regulation of identities, being a part but apart, and campus as contested space. These discourses are characterized by descriptions of perceptions and symbolic norms, belongingness and non-belongingness, and place-work strategies employed by community constituents, both within and without the university. The findings have important implications for understanding the politicization of identity and place in times of conflict.

Universities, worldwide, fulfill the values, goals, and symbolic structures associated with the principles of producing an educated citizenry. Those that seek to contribute to and to partake of these values are changed by their interaction with the physical space of the university, such as the school, the classroom, the library, or the university. “[P]laces become meaningful from personally important experiences, such as realizations, milestones, and experiences of personal growth” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 2). Indeed, one’s identity changes as a result of that interaction with space (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983): one goes from being an individual to a member of a group that belongs to that place, such as a student, a professor, a coach, a mentor, or a leader. As identity is transformed, place belongingness is created and an individual becomes attached to the educational space associated with the identity. “[F]or many people their professional and/or organizational identity may be more pervasive and important than ascribed identities based on gender, age, ethnicity, race, or nationality” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 121).

In light of this transformation, what does it mean when that place is no longer safe? Or when the identity associated with that space conflicts with ethnicity, race, gender, or nationality? News reports increasingly detail violence in schools and on college campuses around the world. In the Western hemisphere these incidents garner a great deal of public attention; however, there is a long history of violence on the campuses of universities across sub-Saharan Africa, related to the politicized nature...
of education in the region (Chege, 2009). Dibua (2004) chronicled the struggle of students at Nigerian universities against authoritarian governance from the 1970s to now, noting the “muzzling” of opposition to military dictatorships through the closure of universities and the arrest of student leaders. Mazrui and Mutunga (2000) described the conflicts between academic staff and the postcolonial regime in Kenya as “rapidly restricting the intellectual arena and creating a state of intellectual deprivation that is bound to limit academic choice and threaten academic freedom” (p. 205). These are but two examples of the subversion of educational goals and values in this region, historically—goals and values which are then compounded by conflicts related to identity, belongingness, and access to the social and economic benefits of education (UNESCO, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Johnson & Stewart, 2007).

This paper illuminates how faculty and staff members within a postconflict context make sense of their experiences with violence at a university in Western Kenya and captures participants’ sense of belongingness as it related to the university space, also known as place attachment. This qualitative study employs discourse analysis to elicit linguistic constructions of context, contestation, and identity as each relates to the university. As a result of analysis, three interrelated discourses emerged from a co-generative approach to interviewing: the regulation of identities, being a part but apart, and contested space. These discourses are then characterized by theories of place attachment and have important implications for understanding the politicization of identity and place in times of conflict.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Education for All (EFA) program published a report entitled *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict & Education*. According to the report’s authors, armed groups often target students, teachers, and educational institutions, due to their participation in state-run organizations. Education is often considered a legitimate target in conflict because of its affiliations with the government or is seen as an opportunity to destabilize communities (Education Under Attack, 2014; Reimers & Chung, 2010). The relationship between higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and their stakeholders is complex, often complicated by colonialism, reform policies, ethnic and political divisions, and imbalanced power dynamics between students, faculty, and government, resulting in patterns of violence at educational institutions across the region (Chege, 2009; Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008).

Between 2009 and 2012, armed combatants in over 28 countries used universities for military purposes, destroyed facilities, and targeted students and faculty. Often, due to ethnic and sectarian divisions, conflict can incubate on a campus between constituents (Education Under Attack, 2014). “[F]aculty are often harassed, dismissed from their jobs, thrown in jail, or executed. Such a hostile environment is not conducive to work and makes people feel insecure and fear for their life” (El-Khawas, 2004, p. 41). Those left behind often describe working conditions besieged by increased responsibility, a lack of leadership, and decreased motivation; factors that contribute to compromised learning for students and burnout among remaining faculty members (Shumba & Mawere, 2012). These contestations between groups—ethnic and political—can create an atmosphere on campus of exclusion, fear, and silence, and can hold hostage the identity development inherent to further education.
Context

Kenya is a democratic republic located in East Africa, sharing borders with Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan. It is home to over 44 million people, eight ethnic groups, and numerous indigenous languages, although English and Kiswahili are the official languages of the republic. Of profound interest to this study are the broader social context and conditions related to the election violence of 2007 and 2008 and the 2013 election. In 2007, as a result of a contentious election campaign between former president Mwai Kibaki, of the Party for National Unity (PNU), and political rival Raila Odinga, of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), Kenya erupted into civil violence, in which 3,000 people were killed and a reported over 600,000 were displaced (Kamungi, 2009).

The tribes at the epicenter of the conflict were the Kikuyu, the Lou, and the Kalenjin; each affiliated with the political camps of the two presidential candidates. Politicians in both camps have been accused of inciting the violence between tribes, and of exploiting grievances related to property rights, income disparity, and fraud. In 2013, members from the contesting parties came together in a politically expedient coalition of Kikuyu and Kalenjin, the Jubilee Alliance, to win the national elections.

The same conditions for violence exist, particularly in Western Kenya where the 2007–2008 election violence reached its apex. Kikuyu and Kalenjin are deeply divided in this region, engaging in intimidation, the destruction of property, and murder (Commission of Inquiry into the Post Election Violence, 2008). Grievances related to ethnicity have been identified as one of the antecedents of violence in Kenya. For example, ethnic allegiance has been a principal cause of conflict since independence in 1965 (Kamungi, 2001). There are longstanding divisions among the ethnic communities of Kenya, often attributed to the pervasive belief that some ethnic groups are superior to others and should be entitled to better social, economic, and political conditions and benefits in the national equation (Kagwanja, 2003). This has been referred to as retribalization, or the process by which ethnic citizenship supersedes civic citizenship and places higher importance on the membership of an ethnic group through which economic rights are received (Kagwanja, 2003). This process has been associated with physical space, such as who is entitled to live where, and perceptions of belonging within certain regions.

Particularly affected by ethnic divisions and violence was Western Kenya University (a pseudonym), which serves as the context of this study. The institution was closed for two months, trapping faculty and staff on and off campus, contributing to the flight of faculty, staff, and students from the area, and impacting the way the remaining individuals viewed their relationships with the university and the community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Context, in this research, is related to physical space and to our participants’ experiences with and their understanding of place as it relates to violence, belonging, and identity. As a result, we identified the person-process-place framework as a tool for interpreting the discourse of our participants. Scannell and Gifford (2010) devised this framework after noting the vast amount of concepts and definitions inherent to environmental psychology, or how individuals relate to their
physical world. This framework collates three elements of the theoretical orientations related to place identity and attachment: individual and group dynamics related to place, the affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes of place attachment, and the physical and social dimensions of place (2010).

Place attachment is experienced on two different, but interrelated levels: individually and socially. Who is attached and how is that attachment generated and nurtured? At the individual level, attachment occurs due to personal, meaningful experiences with physical space. At the social level, “attachment has been described as a community process in which groups become attached to areas wherein they may practice” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 2). Attachment may be produced when shared spaces have symbolic meaning for members of the group. For example, individuals may self-categorize according to organizational membership and then be attached to the social spaces represented by those organizations (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In this research, the university is an organization associated with physical space; and the meanings, values, and symbols of the university produce attachment and identity in individuals and groups (faculty, staff, and administrators).

The next element of the framework concerns the psychological processes that produce attachment. Scannell and Gifford (2010) identify these as affective, cognitive, and behavioral interactions with physical space. Affectively, people feel emotions related to physical place: fear, love, sadness, and longing (Proshansky et al., 1983). Relevant to our study, the authors note, “[f]urther evidence that attachment to a place is grounded in emotion comes from the literature on displacement, when individuals must leave their places such as in the event of a natural disaster or war, immigration, or relocation” (p. 3). This perspective allowed us to understand the connection and conflict between ethnic identity and the physical space associated with the university and the surrounding community.

Individuals bond to places for many different reasons; often because a specific location or context facilitates an activity that the individual puts great value on (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Within the university space, the actual facilities enable individuals to study, to do service, to conduct research, to learn, to teach, and to make a living. The university space also physically represents important events—graduation, tenure, promotion, mentorship, professional development, commencement, and so forth—and gives individuals and groups a sense of belongingness. We engage in place-work strategies to negotiate the identities and meanings of a place to diverse groups (Hochschild, 2010). These practices relate to place belongingness in that those who fail to reach a consensus on the meaning of a place, due to a lack of power or equal ability, may have their belongingness within that place threatened. These notions of belongingness and place attachment were used to investigate the linguistic construction of the relationship between the participant and the context: the university and community during violent, interethnic conflict. Figure 1 shows the relationships between the theoretical constructs described above.

METHODS

The person, process, place framework is particularly appropriate to a qualitative methodology, in that through interviews we were able to capture participants’ perspectives on and experiences with belongingness, essentially the cognitive, social, and affective process of fitting in, and place attachment to the university as a result of conflict. In order to explore these constructs, we were
guided by two research questions during the fieldwork process: (a) How did university stakeholders narrate their experience with the election violence? and (b) How did the violence inform their constructed meanings of identity, belonging, and attachment to the university and community? We used participants’ descriptions, use of language, and examples from the text to highlight the presence of differing discourses and to weave an account of the phenomenon at the heart of our study.

Participants

The study took place in August 2013 at Western Kenya University. The election took place in March 2013 and fieldwork was conducted in August in order to capture the reflections of participants on current and past events. We used nonprobabilistic, purposeful sampling, consistent with a qualitative methodology, to locate participants for this study. We began by identifying major administrators on campus. We then employed snowball sampling, a technique by which a researcher will start with a small sample and then seek more participants through interactions with that initial group (Patton, 2002). Sampling ended with data saturation, when no new insights or relevant information emerged from interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

As a result of fieldwork, interviews with 16 faculty members, university administrators, and staff provided deep, descriptive accounts of their experiences with violence and its impact on their self-concept and relations within the university space. These include individuals who directly experienced the violence or were observers. Participants included professors, adjuncts, and instructors at the university. Additionally, nine participants were either administrators,
such as deputy vice chancellors, deans, department chairs, directors; or staff, such as athletic coaches (games tutor). Eleven participants were men and five were women. The average years of service among participants was 15 years at the university. Participants represented Kalenjin (including subgroups, such as Nandi and Kipsigis), Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya (from the subgroup Bukusu), and Kisii ethnic groups. Due to the nature of the research and the small sample size, further biographical information on each participant is omitted in order to protect their identities.

Data Collection

Western Kenya University was identified as an information-rich site because of its regional location and proximity to the 2008 election violence. Interaction with participants began in August of 2013 and ended after a three-week field visit. Data was collected through open-ended interviews and observations that were recorded as field notes. Participants were all asked the same questions, but the structure of the protocol allowed the researcher to ask probing questions to elicit detailed descriptions and better understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences—this is referred to as the responsive interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2009). The interviews were constructed to elicit a discursive act, in which “articulation and responsive interpretation involve all participants [respondent and researchers] in undertaking the processes of transformational semiosis” (Perinbanaygam, 1991, p. 67). A native English and Kiswahili speaker transcribed our interviews in order to capture the cultural and contextual meanings of participant discourse (Rubin & Rubin, 2009).

Data Analysis

Participant accounts were analyzed using a discourse approach that entailed the treatment of interview transcripts as text, or as “records of discourse” (Johnstone, 2002, p. 19). A native speaker transcribed the interviews in order to capture nuance, pauses, and linguistic devices specific to the context (such as the use of local words and phrases unfamiliar to the researchers). We used discourse analysis, as this approach views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the manner in which social and political domination are reproduced in text and talk (Fairclough, 2003; Johnstone, 2002). Discourse analysis is based on the understanding that there is much more going on when people communicate than the mere transfer of information (Fairclough, 2003).

Throughout analysis we identified signifying acts in the discourse that revealed underlying social structures and practice in regard to ethnicity and tribal allegiances on campus. Context is key to social practice in that participants construct the meaning of place within certain parameters (Di Masso, Dixon, & Durheim, 2014). Social practice must then be interpreted through theory, in this case, place attachment and belongingness, in order to account for the nondiscursive elements of the phenomenon (Phillips & Jorgenson, 2002). Throughout analysis, we identified commonly shared discursive resources that elucidated thematic concepts related to identity, belongingness, and space.
FINDINGS

Several significant findings emerged as a result of the analysis of interview transcripts as discourse indicative of meaning and social practice within the context of Western Kenya University. We focus on the regulation of identities at the university, the processes inherent to belongingness within the institution (being a part of the space, but also being apart from it), and the perceptions of faculty and staff of the university as an ethnic enclave and their meanings related to place, or the university as contested space. We use excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate the findings, as well as to “make publicly available the textual data on which particular interpretations are based” (Di Masso et al., 2014, p. 76), consistent with a discourse analysis approach. Moreover, this section seeks to address how “who we are” is related to “where we are” by combining varying discourses embedded in and characterized by a broader political and social context (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000).

Regulating Identities

The first and most significant feature of the aggregated discourse of our participants is related to the regulation of identity at Western Kenya University and in the community. Specifically, narratives related to the election violence focused on identity and how identity was established external to the individual, related to perceived political affiliation, family name, or ethnic community (identifiers that are often intertwined within this context). Identity is established by the enforcement of symbolic norms regulating who is attached to the university and the nurture of certain identities over others at the university.

Essential to our understanding of the discourse is the pervasive belief among participants that identity is tangible. As an administrator expressed, “I can almost tell who comes from where! Actually everybody here knows.” Within this context, the individuals, due to possible negative outcomes, must manage their identities. “The moment they realize [I] am not a Luo anything can happen . . . may be eventually may be [I] could resign because it is not safe to work here” (Faculty member). In this instance, we see the participant self-regulating identity in order to maintain safety.

Participants denoted that identity and associated fear were prevalent on campus, possibly limiting employment opportunities.

I would say that there was a spirit of negativity, that spirit of suspicion, you are not too sure how to relate with this lady, how to with this man and you are not too sure you are in the right place because there was even some message circulating on campus that if you don’t come from this place once you have gone please don’t come back. We wouldn’t need you around. (Administrator)

Fear and suspicion at the university functioned as a way of regulating identity, particularly political party affiliation, which is related to ethnicity in the Kenyan context. Identity also related to symbolic norms established within the community about who is actually from the area.

So first of all let us agree that some of us we don’t have anything that we can fall back to where we come from and we have stayed here for twenty-thirty years. For to tell me that I should go back to Kisii you are telling me that I should just die, because I don’t have another place I would go to. (Adjunct faculty member)
This is a consistent discursive notion in the stories of participants: that they are, for all intents and purposes, not perceived as being attached to the area where the university is located due to perceptions about who belongs and who does not. Attachment is inherently connected to issues of identity in that individuals may construct their identity as a result of their interaction with physical organizational space and the symbolic norms disseminated within this space and regulated by its members (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Despite being members of an out-group, university members of nonacceptable ethnicities and political affiliations, due to their attachment to place, put themselves in mortal danger to stay.

The story of one administrator particularly highlights the relationship between identity and space and elucidates the fear and expectations associated with the regulation of identity.

So in the morning as I was leaving the barrier was still on but they allowed me to pass. They were in preparation. Yes they were getting ready. So that is why now . . . I stayed in the house; so “where is this man?” I had not been seen being given security here because now when they go around I am not in, they had not known when I left because of course they would have known from the gate if you just say dean they tell you [participant’s name]? They don’t say any other dean because of the [ethnicity] . . . so they were wondering where I am! They reached my farm then they found some people had harvested my maize on my behalf . . . so they entered the shamba [farm] cut down trees, cut the wires. Yeah they could have [harmed me], if opportunity was given, they would have. . . . One of them said, “We were also looking for him to kill him.” And I still meet him, the person who said, “We were also looking for him to kill him.”

The participant feared the groups coming to assault him due to his ethnicity, but he also knew who they were: people with whom he worked, lived, and taught over his tenure at the university. He told his story in sotto voce, which indicated a continuing concern over his interactions with those who sought to harm him during the violence and that his identity was continually monitored in this space.

Another way identity was regulated was through the renaming of those who did not possess the in-group ethnicity (ODM supporters and Kalenjin). Participants used the term madoadoa. This is a Kiswahili term that literally means spotted or blot, which in this context meant individuals stained by their ethnicity to describe those who did not conform to local beliefs about belongingness in the space of the community and the university, including Kikuyu and other ethnic minorities in the area. This identity marked individuals for targeting by the Kalenjin during the violence.

Then the clashes start and they start bringing letters, memos with . . . University letter head . . . whoever is in that land to go home because he is madoadoa [spotted]. (Faculty member)

Here the participant describes how, during the conflict, Kikuyu faculty and staff received letters on university letterhead exhorting them to leave the area and the university. The above excerpt seems to indicate that the university perpetuated xenophobia in the community and legitimized the concept of renaming.

Case (1996) suggests that there is a “dialectical process” that individuals experience when being home and away from home. However, in this contested space, the process relates specifically to the same place. This contestation created a tension in the narratives of participants whose identities were regulated; home was both something physical that belongs to the individual and something that was phenomenologically experienced by the individual (Moore, 2000).
At the administrative level we had a good number either resigning, getting jobs elsewhere. The ones who remained here are a few of us who have been born and brought up here so despite everything else we had nowhere else to go, because when it came where do I go at the end of the day? My parents are in [local town], they have been there since 1920s, and we don’t have any other home! (Staff member)

Therefore, home, according to the dominant ethnicity in the community, did not belong to madoadoa (non-Kalenjin ethnicities and PNU supporters) due to their perceived identity.

**Being a Part But Apart**

Yet another characteristic of the discourse were the processes expressed in our dialogues related to place-identity and belongingness. Proshansky et al. (1983) define place-identity as the feelings, attitudes, values, and preferences that relate to the physical setting within which people experience their everyday lives (p. 59). This includes interactions with others in this setting. “Other people are important in shaping the place-identity of the person. It is . . . also a function of what other people do, say, and think” (p. 60). From this also emerges feelings of belongingness, or inclusion and positive emotional attachment, which may be challenged by other’s place attachment and create place aversion (1983).

Belongingness in this context related specifically to inclusion and exclusion and the mediation of identity.

Actually the university became a target in 2007, the university became a target, and the government had to station soldiers in the campus to protect those members of staff who were there and other things. But also there were claims and counter claims about ethnicity and all those . . . people saying they want their people employed, you know the leadership of the university does not belong to the locals, which were basically reflections of the bigger picture it is not isolated to the university alone. (Administrator)

Essentially, this characteristic of the discourse focuses on the process of belonging at the university and the community, as a result of the violence. In the following pieces of dialogue, the reader can envision how these symbolic communities emerged in the use of descriptors such as “clean” and “good”:

I walked five kilometers from campus; since it was assumed because of my ethnic identity . . . I was a clean man I could pass the roadblocks. (Faculty member)

To date I am the only Kisii in the department. I am not a good Kenyan . . . good Kenyan ensures that when you become chairman or anything you must employ your tribesmen. (Faculty member/Interim administrator)

A clean man is one with access to space. A good Kenyan is one who shows favoritism. Being good and clean was indicative of an individual who belonged to the university. In both instances, these characteristics demonstrate both physical and psychological connections to belongingness within this context.

Individuals associate place with meaning and memories, which generates attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), and they then act on the basis of the attachment. They defend it, they (re)visit it, they exclude others from it, and they maintain proximity to it. Attachment is evident in the discourse of the participants—both those victimized and those from the dominant ethnic group.
We started noticing some kind of groupings of a particular people who would be grouping and talking to themselves. So when we approached the group they would . . . sort of change the subject and not want to talk much. So this continued all the way . . . throughout, but we were not suspicious because some of us have been born and brought up in this area so we did not suspect anything. (Staff member)

It was very bad—the relationship between me as a Kikuyu with Kalenjins was not very good and the whole of this department I am alone. Everybody else at that time was from the local community. (Faculty member)

So it is like when one comes from campus you have to be stopped and be asked who you are, where you are from, your ethnicity. Some of us just kept off especially after we came around and we realized things were not very safe; we just kept off. We just had to keep to our houses. (Dean)

Each piece of narrative demonstrates a commonality in the discourse: belongingness challenged by non-belongingness. Despite having positions of importance at the university, growing up in the community, or being a colleague, individuals who possessed the less desirable ethnicity were positioned as outsiders—physically, socially, professionally, and personally.

For some, the belongingness struggle was too much and their place attachment disrupted. Many participants narrated the loss of colleagues due to threats to their belongingness, and, subsequently, their identities. Our participants framed loss in a variety of ways. The first was through dark humor:

**Us:** So what changed after the elections, what happened, what was different on campus after the violence in 2007/08 specifically; when people came back and school sessions started what was different on campus?

**Faculty member:** What was different on campus? I think one thing that was different was that there was quite a few people who were supposed to be there with me who were not there. [laughter]

Yet another framed the loss of colleagues as an “exodus”:

First of all let us talk of mass exodus, mass exodus of people who felt they were not safe. The main request was for them to get to other campuses, but senior people at the lecturers level and all that most of them resigned from [Western Kenya University]. (Staff member)

Dixon and Durrheim (2000) assert that the withdrawal from certain places is done in an effort to maintain self-integrity. This discourse reflects “a dis-location of identity brought about by a sudden transformation of valued places. From this perspective, the sense of loss that they express is not only a loss of place but also, more profoundly, a loss of self” (p. 36). Those who stayed were able to accommodate the duality of (non)belongingness, both psychologically and physically, and those who left could not. In some instances, individuals were willing to maintain their professional identity, but not at the cost of their ethnic one—this was exemplified by a participant’s assertion that there are employees that “still teach here, yes, but they don’t stay here.” Identity, during the conflict, was intertwined with perceptions of belonging and physical place, uncovering a discourse that demonstrated how individuals were a part of the university community, in a professional capacity, but made apart from it due to (perceived) ethnic and political allegiances.
Campus as Contested Space

This last feature links the above discourses to the physical space of the university, specifically elucidating different descriptions of the university and surrounding community, demonstrating that the “[m]eaning of spaces and places are not universally shared” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 67). As a result, place, identity, and belonging become manifestly entangled when participants describe how they were kept out, victimized, and isolated. Hochschild (2010) refers to these connective activities as “place-work strategies” engaged by in-groups and out-groups within organizational contexts. These strategies are employed because of contestation over who belongs where, why, and how and includes appropriate deference to organizational culture and symbols, spatial control (“using physical space as an instrument of conflict” [p. 635]), and intimidation. The in-group (ODM supporters and Kalenjin), in order to contest the belongingness of many of our participants, used these place-work strategies. In the following text, the participant, an adjunct at the university, recounts being intimidated in his home close to campus.

And I remember we were in the house preparing to take our lunch, which we never took because now kumbe [surprising] things had happened . . . you know we are not far from the road, and now people were chanting and screaming and making all that kind of noise along the road. Shouting that indeed communities that did not vote for so and so . . . they would have to suffer the consequences. That is when the university was literally attacked, invaded so to speak. And when they came to the university they were literally . . . they surrounded the buildings, particularly the houses where they knew these are the people who could have supported the man that we did not want. So they took whatever, fruits they ate and when they were done they walked away. And it was at that particular time when the government sent askaris [soldiers], policemen to come and rescue us. (Adjunct faculty member)

In this account, there was no physical violence; however, local community members demonstrated their right to the physical space through intimidation, a common place-work strategy to assert dominance over space, by taking fruit from the trees on campus.

Many in the community and on campus, according to participants’ narratives, were genetically required to “obey the force of ethnicity” (Faculty member). This entailed kowtowing to ethnic interests, organizationally, at the expense of individual interests. Faculty and staff victimized by interethnic conflict began to see the university as an “ethnic enclave” that perpetuated ethnic division and silenced discussion of the conflict.

The chief architects or say those who were being used to create this conflict, destroy our homes and all that, they were well known. Then it came a time when the university was forced to employ them [Kalenjin from the local community]. So this is the person who burnt my home, I know this is the person who took all my property and this man now is employed here, put in a senior position and you are with him. What kind of working relationship do you expect? (Staff member)

Here a staff member is forced to work with those responsible for his displacement, creating tension in the work environment, and contesting the individual’s feeling of attachment to the university. This quote exemplifies spatial control by the dominant ethnicity through the physical appropriation of employment at the institution, marginalizing those victimized by the violence in the institutional hierarchy.

Deference to organizational principals is a key place-work strategy for maintaining in-group dominance over physical space (Hochschild, 2010). This includes preserving unquestioning
reverence for cultural standards and symbols. A participant relayed, “They [locals] were not amused about one administrator at the university—they were not happy because they said he was strict and did not like to employ [them].” In another account, a faculty member, in the retelling of interactions with local community members after the conflict in which she played a role in brokering peace between the university and the community, stated, “The community members told us, said they were angry. ‘There is nothing we benefit. We only get waste products—the sewerage and condoms.’” In this case, community members saw the university as not showing proper allegiance to local standards related to ethnicity (such as favoritism in hiring practices) and ownership of space (who the university and its resources should belong to).

Despite continued contestation over who the university belonged to, one participant narrated hope to move past ethnic divisions toward a united identity characterized by diversity.

Even after those experiences I still decided to come back and build my house; that is what we are doing now. So we are building and everybody is building around and people are amazed; you know, we are talking about people from almost every community—your neighbor you don’t talk the same language—and so people are feel happy because they know that we are Kenyans by the virtue of the fact that we are speaking different languages. I think that has made people feel that we can move on. (Adjunct faculty member)

If not happiness, another participant at least wished for normalcy: a desire for decreased tension and a working environment made up of colleagues, not enemies.

Well for me . . . some people talked about tension, there was tension among the workers and people looking at them as though they needed not be here; ok there was that tension but I just behaved the way I was behaving, I was greeting people they way I greet them, I did not show them any hatred or you know or no sign of trying to revenge or so I behaved normally. Whether people liked it or not, I had to be myself because if I was to use, you know, the idea that: since us, I being a Kikuyu was being targeted what have I to do with these people, I would not talk to them, you know, I would have decided I wouldn’t talk to them—after all, they are not the people who have employed me, I would have chosen to have a, you know, negative attitude or a heart of revenge. I just decided, “No, enough is enough. We have to live together. I have been here for many years. Why should you become enemies?” So I behaved normal. I thought from the way I was behaving they also learned that there was no need to keep a grudge inside them. And we used to even talk to them—we talked with one another and we said, “No can we go back to where we were, forget about the violence.” (Administrator)

In each of these excerpts of dialogue, we see remaining university members attempting to narrate a new vision of the institution in which they can move past violence through a variation in behavior (i.e., rebuilding and forgetting about the violence). This is suggestive of what Proshansky et al. (1983) refer to as environmental control, where “place identity/environmental discrepancies are minimized” (p. 72). Essentially, if one can’t change the place or the people within the place, then one must change their own behavior. For those who stayed after the violence, control over their behavior was critical to maintaining a sense of belonging on a contested campus.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research questions framing this study asked: (a) How did university stakeholders narrate their experience with the election violence? and (b) How did the violence inform their
constructed meanings of identity, belonging, and attachment to the university and community? To the first question, we show how the election and associated violence framed participant narratives. Participants often referenced their ethnic identity, political affiliations, and how those identities contrasted with in-group norms and dynamics on campus and within the community. Inherent to our participants’ narratives was the concept of power.

[When a work group views cultural differences as having the potential to make only a marginal or negative contribution to work, the dominant cultural group likely defines the prevailing expectations, norms, and assumptions about work, and conflicts, if not suppressed, are settled by power. (Ely & Thomas, 2001, p. 267)]

As a result of power differentials in the community and work environment, the aggregated discourse often underscored the affective dimensions of the relationship between physical space and political context, such as fear, anger, and sadness. The participants narrated loss, isolation, and marginalization resulting from the non-belongingness produced by their lack of power born from their incongruent ethnic status and political affiliations.

To answer the second question regarding the constructed meanings and attachments of participants, we identified significant events and concepts in the physical setting of the university that influenced the ways in which our participants came to self-identify and understand their individual belongingness and collective belongingness at the university and in the community. Within the university space, due to violence experienced as a result of contestations over access, ethnicity, and rights to resources, individual university members described their identities regulated and challenged. New identities were created and enforced by in-group members in the community and university (e.g., madoadoa). In light of this, many faculty, staff, administrators, and students fled to areas where their perceived identity may have been accepted, generating feelings of belonging; “people choose environments congruent with their self-concepts and . . . move to find places that are more congruent with their sense of self” (Rooney et al., 2010, p. 64).

In this case, those who fled the university prioritized their ethnic identities over that of the organizational identity. For those that stayed, space took on a new meaning. Tuan (1977) writes, “Place is a special kind of object . . . it is an object in which one can dwell” (p. 12). The objectification of space was inherent to our participants’ narratives as they described roads, buildings, and departments as destructive objects, removing the neutrality of such spaces. These spaces were politicized, barring access to resources, preventing the enactment of professional responsibilities and roles, and attenuating opportunities for dwelling to those who did not possess the right identity, despite formal organizational membership.

In the United States, discourse on stakeholder identity in higher education typically focuses on the conflict between work identity and personal identity, such as work-life balance (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015, among many others), racial and work identity (Patitu & Hinton, 2003, among others), gender and work identity (Lester, 2008, among others), and sexual orientation and work identity (Talburt, 2000). Moreover, research often places the onus on the individual to balance identities with little reference to the role of the organization. Our findings contribute to the concept that identity can be shaped by connection to the institution; however, there was little evidence in our study that the university took action to address the contestations over identity, belonging, and space as a result of the election. As a participant noted, “No, enough is enough. We have to live together. I have been here for many years. Why should you become enemies?”—thus indicating a personal
responsibility for relieving the tensions produced by contested workspaces and a commitment to individual environmental control (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Yet, we assert that the university does have a role to play in addressing ethnic and work identity contestations, particularly in fragile environments where such contestations may breed violence. The challenge for organizational leaders, according to Rooney et al. (2010), is to allow subgroup identities to be maintained by stakeholders, while “locating them within the context of a new superordinate sense of place” (p. 67). Our research alludes to the potential of the university, as a major place of employment, to be in a unique position to develop positive place-work identities and resources, as their physical spaces are significant to the intellectual and personal growth, independence, self-discovery, and development of individuals (Chow & Healey, 2008). Ely and Thomas (2001) suggest that, in culturally diverse workplaces, organizational leaders must leverage diversity to accomplish organizational goals—particularly in situations focused on joint inquiry, which characterize the modern university—and create cross-cultural learning opportunities. Placing value on diversity validates the cultural identity of workers and increases their feelings of effectiveness and commitment to the organization (2001). These recommendations, however, are produced from research in the Global North. Further research is needed to understand how a positive work identity might be developed in conflict and postconflict conditions.

CONCLUSION

The impact of conflict on higher education has been largely ignored (Pacheco & Johnson, 2014), despite the fact that the flight of higher education professionals that results from conflict has stark consequences for universities in fragile contexts (Docquier, Lohest, & Marfouk, 2007). As noted earlier, universities in sub-Saharan Africa are particularly susceptible to the intrusion of violence due to a history of political interference. What this discussion demonstrates is a need to more fully understand how faculty and staff experience the university environment and how they come to view those experiences in order to uncover strategies that protect the university and those who identify with its space during crisis. These measures could contest dangerous ethnic discourse on campus and focus on building “capacity for evolving a shared consciousness about the meanings of the institution, its activities, programs, and mission, in times of conflict” (Johnson, 2013, p. 342). As discussions about the effect of conflict on universities burgeon, integrating notions of belongingness as it relates to physical place may enrich nascent strategies to build peaceful campus communities.

REFERENCES


Ane Turner Johnson is an associate professor of educational leadership at Rowan University. Her research focuses on higher education policy in sub-Saharan Africa, conflict and peacebuilding in higher education, university rebuilding, and qualitative research methods.

Dawn S. Singleton is currently an educational leadership doctoral candidate at Rowan University. She is also the Assistant Director of the Educational Opportunity Fund Program at Rowan. Her research interests include gender, race and ethnicity in higher education, intersectionality, and university administration.